Exploring Online Education in South African Correctional Centres: Perspectives from ODEL students

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ABSTRACT	Published Online: December 02, 2024

Higher education in Southern Africa is in an era that has transcended the traditional boundaries of space and time. This chapter aims to explore the experiences and difficulties of officials and incarcerated offenders in South African correctional facilities, who are taking online classes in Open Distance Electronic Learning (ODEL) institutions like the University of South Africa (UNISA).

This chapter employed a qualitative desktop research method which involves analysing secondary data that includes previously published academic articles, media reports, and policies from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Department of Correctional Services (DCS).

The main findings demonstrate the considerable obstacles faced by institutionalized ODEL learning. The major themes of student challenges include 1. Limited Access to Computers and the Internet (for safety concerns). 2. Low levels of Digital Literacy. 3. Insufficient Individualised Student Support, and conversely, 4. Recognition of Online Learning Benefits. The significance of the study is that it offers valuable insight for shaping and promoting more inclusive student support strategies by attending to the diverse needs of students in non-traditional learning environments. The study also highlights how crucial it is to create digital literacy initiatives and expand access to technology infrastructure to guarantee that all students succeed in online learning in the Southern Africa region.

KEYWORDS:
Correctional Centre, Correctional Official, Digital Literacy, Open Distance Electronic Learning (ODEL), Reintegration, Offender.

1. INTRODUCTION

Education in correctional centres is an essential part of the rehabilitation process and the move to fully Comprehensive Online Distance and Electronic Learning (ODEL) poses a significant challenge in the context of students in correctional centres, particularly in South Africa, where education is viewed as a critical element of rehabilitation. A correctional centre is defined by the Correctional Services Act 111 of 1998, as a place for the reception, detention, confinement, training, or treatment of persons liable to detention in custody or to placement under protective custody. Criminals are sent for rehabilitation to help them not engage in crime again, to keep them in detention, or to place them under protective custody (Correctional Services Act 111, 1998:1).

According to UNESCO (2022), Open Distance and Electronic Learning is a way of providing learning

opportunities characterized by the separation of teacher and learner in time and/or place and using various media including print, audio, video, and computer technologies to bridge that gap. Likewise, UNESCO (2022) emphasizes the physical and temporal separation between teacher and learner, highlighting the role of various media in facilitating communication and learning. This definition underscores the flexibility of ODeL in terms of time and place, allowing learners to access education irrespective of their location

The transition to ODEL in correctional settings is complicated by several factors such as computer literacy, access to technological tools, educational support, and the overall efficacy of online learning to highlight important areas where curriculum development and delivery need to be improved (Johnson and Goss 2019; Higgins, 2017; Tewksbury & Stengel, 2016). In view of this single case, the study explores the difficulties and experiences that officials and offenders at 's Correctional Centres, who are taking online university courses, encounter. The study will address these two research questions.

- RQ1: What are the difficulties and experiences of officials and offenders at a Correctional Centre who are taking online courses at ODEL universities?

- RQ2: What Student support do correctional officials and offenders enrolled in ODEL institutions receive from the Correctional Centre?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Technological limitations are a primary barrier to the effective participation of incarcerated students in ODEL programs. Correctional facilities often have restricted access to the internet and digital devices due to security concerns. This lack of access hampers the ability of students to engage with online resources and participate in virtual classrooms. According to Johnson and Goss (2019), access to technology in correctional settings is often limited to supervised sessions, which restricts the flexibility and self-paced nature that is fundamental to online learning. Additionally, limited technological infrastructure within correctional facilities further exacerbates the problem. Many institutions lack the necessary hardware, such as computers servers, and software needed to support comprehensive online learning environments (Higgins, 2017). This shortage creates a digital divide, where incarcerated students are unable to benefit from the advancements in educational technology that their non-incarcerated peers enjoy (Tewksbury & Stengel, 2016).

Furthermore, the bureaucratic procedures and security protocols in place often delay the implementation of technological upgrades and the integration of new digital learning tools. Such delays can result in outdated systems that are not compatible with modern online educational platforms, leading to a frustrating and inefficient learning experience for incarcerated students (Farley & Pike, 2016). These systemic issues highlight the need for targeted investments in technology and infrastructure to bridge the gap in educational opportunities for incarcerated learners.

The institutionalized population faces several constraints that further complicate their participation in ODEL programs. These include limited access to study materials, restricted communication with educators, and the psychological challenges associated with incarceration. As noted by Ndebele and Maphosa (2018), the environment within correctional centres is not conducive to learning due to frequent interruptions and the overall lack of a supportive learning atmosphere. Incarcerated students often experience isolation from the academic community, which can lead to feelings of disconnection and demotivation. The lack of peer interaction and collaborative learning opportunities, which are integral components of a successful educational experience, can be particularly detrimental (Ellis, 2017). This isolation is compounded by the limited availability of academic mentors and tutors who can provide the necessary guidance and support to help students navigate their coursework (Gehring, 2015).

Moreover, the psychological impact of incarceration, including stress, anxiety, and depression, can significantly affect an individual's ability to focus and perform academically. These mental health challenges are often exacerbated by the prison environment, where educational pursuits might be viewed as secondary to survival and coping strategies (Mezirow, 2021). Addressing these psychological barriers is essential for creating a more supportive and effective learning environment within correctional facilities. Digital literacy is a critical factor in the success of ODEL programs. Many offenders may lack the necessary skills to effectively navigate online learning platforms. This skill gap can lead to frustration and decreased motivation to engage with educational content. A study by Smith et al. (2020) highlights that digital literacy training should be an integral part of educational programs in correctional facilities to ensure that students can fully benefit from online learning opportunities. The issue of digital literacy is further complicated by the limited prior exposure to technology that many incarcerated individuals have experienced. According to Petersilia (2023), many prisoners come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds where access to digital technology is scarce, leading to a significant initial gap in digital skills. This disparity necessitates tailored educational programs that start with basic computer literacy before advancing to more complex tasks (Wade, 2017).

Additionally, ongoing support and continuous learning opportunities are crucial for maintaining and advancing digital literacy skills. Regular practice and the availability of resources such as online tutorials and help desks can greatly enhance the learning experience (Brown, 2016). Programs that incorporate continuous skill development can help bridge the digital divide and empower incarcerated students to become proficient in using digital tools for their educational advancement.

Access to technology is another significant issue. In the Correctional Centre, where many officials and offenders are enrolled in online university programs, access to digital devices and the internet is heavily regulated. This regulation is primarily due to security concerns, which often lead to limited availability of computers and restricted internet access (Jansen & Venter, 2021). This limited access makes it challenging for students to complete assignments, participate in discussions, and access necessary learning materials.

The limited access to technology can also affect the quality of education received. According to Rose and LeBel (2023), without consistent access to up-to-date technological tools, students are unable to engage in the same depth of research and interactive learning that is possible in a traditional educational setting. This technological gap can result in an uneven educational experience, where incarcerated students receive a subpar education compared to their non-incarcerated counterparts (Reeves, 2019).

Moreover, the restrictions on internet access within correctional facilities often prevent students from accessing online libraries, databases, and other digital resources that are essential for higher education. This lack of access to

information hampers their ability to conduct research, complete assignments, and engage with current academic discussions (Clark, 2021). Addressing these access issues is crucial for ensuring that incarcerated students can fully participate in and benefit from online educational programs. Educational support within correctional centres is also crucial. The availability of tutors and mentors who can provide guidance and support to students is often limited. This lack of support can hinder the learning process and reduce the effectiveness of online education programs. Ginsburg and Draper (2017) argue that strong support systems are necessary to address the unique needs of incarcerated learners, including personalized tutoring and mental health support.

In addition to personal tutoring, peer support networks can play a significant role in the educational success of incarcerated students. According to Heron and McKenzie (2021), peer mentoring programs where more advanced students assist their peers can help bridge the gap created by the lack of formal educational support. These programs not only enhance learning outcomes but also foster a sense of community and mutual support among students.

Institutional support from correctional administration is equally important. As highlighted by Coulter (2014), administrative backing for educational initiatives can lead to better resource allocation, including the provision of dedicated study spaces, educational materials, and time allowances for study. Supportive policies and a commitment to educational programming from the administration can significantly enhance the learning environment and outcomes for incarcerated students.

The overall efficacy of online learning in correctional settings is influenced by the aforementioned factors. To highlight important areas where curriculum development and delivery need improvement, it is essential to consider the specific challenges faced by officials and offenders enrolled in online courses. According to a report by the Department of Correctional Services (2023), the efficacy of online learning programs is often compromised by inadequate infrastructure, lack of trained personnel, and insufficient funding.

Research by Crayton and Neusteter (2018) supports the notion that without proper infrastructure, the potential benefits of online education in correctional facilities cannot be fully realized. Their findings indicate that investment in educational technologies and infrastructure is critical for the success of these programs. Moreover, training staff to support online education effectively can enhance the delivery and management of these programs (Leone & Wruble, 2015). Further studies suggest that integrating feedback mechanisms and continuously assessing the effectiveness of online learning modules can lead to significant improvements. Programs that incorporate regular evaluations and adapt based on student feedback are more likely to meet the educational needs of incarcerated students (Steurer & Smith,

2023). This continuous improvement process is essential for ensuring that online learning remains effective and relevant in correctional settings.

3. CONNECTIVISM AS A THEORETICAL LENS ON ODEL IN CORRECTIONAL CENTRES

The theoretical framework for this study is grounded in the principles of Connectivism, a learning theory introduced by George Siemens and Stephen Downes in 2005. Connectivism provides a lens through which to examine the learning experiences of officials and offenders in the context of online distance electronic learning (ODEL) at correctional centres. This theory emphasizes the role of technology in facilitating learning and the formation of knowledge networks, which is particularly relevant in the digital age.

3.1. Learning as a Process of Connecting

One of the core tenets of Connectivism is that learning is a process of connecting. This principle underscores the importance of building networks of knowledge through interactions with various information sources, including digital platforms (Siemens, 2005). In the context of this study, officials and offenders utilize online learning environments to connect with educational content, instructors, and peers. These connections are vital for the construction of knowledge and the enhancement of learning experiences.

The online platforms provided by online institutions in South Africa enable students to access a wealth of information and resources, thereby facilitating the formation of learning networks. This networked approach allows learners to draw on diverse sources of knowledge, enhancing their understanding and enabling them to apply this knowledge in practical contexts (Kop & Hill, 2008). For incarcerated students, the ability to connect with external information sources is particularly valuable, given the constraints of their physical environment.

3.2. Learning May Reside in Non-Human Appliances

Connectivism also posits that learning may reside in non-human appliances, such as digital devices and online platforms (Downes, 2010). This principle highlights the role of technology in storing and transmitting knowledge, which can be accessed and utilized by learners as needed. In the digital age, the ability to access and interact with information through technological means is crucial for effective learning. For officials and offenders in correctional centres, access to computers and the internet is a gateway to a vast repository of knowledge and educational materials. These digital tools act as extensions of the learners' cognitive processes, enabling them to engage with and assimilate information efficiently (Siemens, 2005). The integration of technology in the learning process thus becomes a critical factor in facilitating educational success in ODEL programs.

3.3. Learning is More Critical Than Knowing

Another important principle of Connectivism is that the ability to learn is more critical than knowing static information. This principle emphasizes the importance of developing the skills to navigate, interpret, and apply information in dynamic environments (Siemens, 2005). In other words, the capacity to learn and adapt to new information is more valuable than the mere possession of knowledge.

This aspect of Connectivism is particularly relevant for the participants of this study, who must continuously adapt to new technologies and learning modalities. The skills they develop in navigating online courses, utilizing digital tools, and connecting with various information sources are essential for their academic and professional growth (Downes, 2010). By fostering these adaptive learning skills, ODEL programs can better prepare incarcerated individuals for successful reintegration into society and the workforce.

By applying Connectivism as a theoretical framework, this understands how technology facilitates learning for officials and offenders enrolled in online university programs. The theory provides a comprehensive lens for examining how digital tools and platforms enable the formation of knowledge networks and enhance the learning process. It also helps to elucidate the challenges and opportunities associated with online learning in correctional settings, highlighting the importance of connectivity, technological access, and adaptive learning skills.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative desktop research approach, utilizing document analysis to explore the experiences and difficulties faced by officials and incarcerated offenders in South African correctional facilities who are participating in online classes through Open Distance and Electronic Learning (ODEL) institutions in South Africa. The document analysis method involves a systematic review of secondary data sources to gather insights into the research topic. This approach was chosen because it allows for an in-depth examination of existing knowledge and narratives surrounding the intersection of higher education, correctional services, and online learning. The analyzed documents include:

1. **Academic Literature:** Peer-reviewed articles and book chapters discussing online learning challenges, digital literacy, and higher education in correctional contexts.
2. **Policy Documents:** Policies and guidelines from the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) and the Department of Correctional Services (DCS) related to education in correctional facilities.
3. **Media Reports:** Credible news articles and reports shedding light on the lived experiences of incarcerated students and officials.
4. **Institutional Reports**: Published documents from South African universities and ODEL institutions detailing student support services and educational infrastructure.

The data were analyzed through thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns and challenges associated with ODEL learning in correctional environments. This process involved the careful coding and categorization of key themes across the selected documents, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by this unique group of students

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study's findings highlight several significant challenges faced by both officials and offenders in accessing and utilizing online learning environments. These challenges are primarily related to limited computer and internet access, low levels of digital literacy, and a lack of individualized support and guidance.

Table 1: Summary of Findings

Theme	Description	Implications
Limited Access to Computers and the Internet	Safety concerns and logistical restrictions often limit access to essential digital tools and internet connectivity.	Students face significant barriers in accessing course materials and online platforms.
Low Levels of Digital Literacy	Both learners and officials lack the digital skills required to effectively engage with online learning systems.	Requires targeted digital literacy training for both students and officials.
Insufficient Individualized Student Support	Correctional facilities' rigid structures hinder the provision of personalized academic assistance.	Students often feel isolated and unsupported in their learning journeys.
Recognition of Online Learning Benefits	ODEL offers flexibility, access to diverse resources, and opportunities for employability and reintegration	Emphasizes the need to overcome barriers to maximize benefits, aligning with societal shifts toward digital literacy and enhanced job competitiveness

4.1. Limited Access to Computer and Internet

One of the most pressing issues identified was the limited access to computers and the internet. This limitation is a common barrier in correctional education, where security concerns often restrict the availability of digital resources (Johnson, Goss, & McAdam, 2019). In many correctional facilities, access to technology is tightly controlled, and opportunities for using computers and the internet are minimal, significantly hindering the ability of students to engage with online learning materials (Wright et al., 2020).

The scarcity of technological resources not only limits the time students can spend on their coursework but also affects the quality of their learning experiences. Without adequate access to computers and reliable internet connections, students struggle to complete assignments, participate in virtual discussions, and access online libraries and databases (Clark & Farkas, 2020). This gap in technological access creates an uneven playing field, disadvantaging incarcerated students compared to their non-incarcerated counterparts. Furthermore, this lack of access can exacerbate feelings of isolation and disconnection from the learning community, which are already significant challenges in distance education (Ryan et al., 2020).

4.2. Low Levels of Computer Literacy

Low levels of computer literacy among participants emerged as another significant barrier. Digital literacy, defined as the ability to effectively use digital tools and platforms, is crucial for success in online learning environments (Ng, 2012). Many incarcerated individuals come from backgrounds with limited exposure to technology, leading to a lack of basic digital skills (Petersilia, 2019). This gap in digital literacy makes it challenging for students to navigate online courses, utilize educational software, and engage with digital learning materials effectively.

Participants reported feeling overwhelmed by the technical aspects of online learning, such as logging into platforms, submitting assignments electronically, and participating in online discussions. This sense of overwhelm can lead to frustration and reduced motivation, ultimately affecting academic performance and retention rates (Wong et al., 2020). Addressing digital literacy through targeted training and support is essential for improving the online learning experiences of incarcerated students. Moreover, providing ongoing digital literacy support can help build confidence and proficiency, enabling students to take full advantage of the educational opportunities available to them (Parkes et al., 2020).

4.3. Lack of Individualized Support

Another critical finding was the absence of individualized help and direction for successfully navigating online courses. Effective online learning often requires personalized support, including academic advising, technical assistance, and tutoring (Mills & Wakefield, 2019). In the context of correctional education, providing such support is challenging due to resource constraints and the unique needs of the incarcerated population (Farley & Pike, 2020).

Participants expressed the need for more tailored guidance to help them understand course content, manage their study schedules, and overcome technical difficulties. The lack of individualized support not only hampers their ability to succeed in their studies but also diminishes the overall efficacy of online learning programs (Brandle et al., 2020). Implementing support systems that address these needs is crucial for enhancing the learning outcomes of incarcerated students. Studies suggest that mentorship programs, where more experienced students or alumni provide guidance, can significantly improve student engagement and success (Zepke, 2018).

4.4. Potential Benefits of Online Learning

Despite these considerable obstacles, participants recognized the potential benefits of online learning in improving their academic and career opportunities. Online education offers flexibility, allowing students to learn at their own pace and according to their schedules, which is particularly advantageous in the structured environment of correctional facilities (Reisdorf & Groselj, 2019). Additionally, online learning can provide access to a broader range of courses and resources than those typically available in traditional classroom settings.

Participants noted that acquiring digital skills and completing online courses could enhance their employability upon release, offering a pathway to better job prospects and successful reintegration into society (Dutton et al., 2020). The recognition of these benefits underscores the importance of overcoming the identified barriers to maximize the potential of online learning in correctional education. Furthermore, the development of these skills aligns with broader societal trends towards digital literacy and technological competence, making incarcerated individuals more competitive in the job market (Ryan & Deci, 2020)

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study highlight several key areas for improvement in the implementation of online learning programs for officials and offenders in correctional centres. Based on the challenges identified, the following recommendations are made to enhance the effectiveness and accessibility of these programs:

▪ Improving Technological Infrastructure

To address the significant barrier of limited access to computers and the internet, it is recommended that substantial investments be made in establishing and maintaining robust technological infrastructure within correctional facilities. This includes ensuring that sufficient computers and reliable internet connections are available to all students (Clark &

Farkas, 2020). By providing these essential resources, correctional facilities can create an environment conducive to effective online learning, thereby enabling students to fully engage with educational materials and complete their coursework efficiently.

▪ **Instruction in Digital Literacy**

Given the low levels of digital literacy identified among participants, it is crucial to develop comprehensive digital literacy programs tailored to the needs of both officials and offenders. These programs should cover basic computer skills, navigation of online learning platforms, and the use of digital tools for academic purposes (Ng, 2012). Providing ongoing digital literacy training will empower students to utilize online learning environments independently and confidently, enhancing their overall educational experience and outcomes (Wong et al., 2020).

▪ **Individualized Assistance**

The lack of individualized support was a significant concern for participants. To address this, correctional education programs should incorporate personalized support systems, such as academic counselling and mentorship programs. Academic counsellors can assist students in planning their studies, managing their time, and addressing specific academic challenges, while mentors can provide guidance, encouragement, and practical advice based on their own experiences (Brandle et al., 2020). These support systems are essential for helping students navigate the complexities of online learning and achieve their educational goals.

▪ **Curriculum Modification**

To increase engagement and relevance, it is recommended that the online curriculum be adapted to meet the specific needs and interests of the correctional population. This can be achieved by incorporating dynamic and captivating educational resources, such as interactive modules, multimedia content, and real-world applications of theoretical concepts (Reisdorf & Groselj, 2019). By making the curriculum more engaging and relevant, educators can foster a greater interest in learning and facilitate the acquisition of new skills that are directly applicable to life after incarceration.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has shed light on the considerable obstacles that officials and offenders in   correctional centres face in accessing and utilizing online learning environments. These challenges include limited technological resources, low levels of digital literacy, and the absence of individualized support. Despite these barriers, participants recognized the potential benefits of online learning in improving their academic and career opportunities.

Connectivism offers valuable insights into the learning experiences of incarcerated students, emphasizing the critical role of technology in creating and sustaining educational networks. By understanding and leveraging these principles,

educational institutions can develop more effective strategies for delivering ODEL programs and supporting the academic success of their students.

By addressing these challenges through targeted investments in technology, comprehensive digital literacy programs, personalized support systems, and curriculum modifications, correctional education programs can significantly enhance the learning experiences and outcomes for incarcerated students. These recommendations aim to create a more equitable and effective educational environment that not only facilitates academic success but also supports the broader goals of rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

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